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Socialization of past event talk: Cultural differences in maternal elaborative reminiscing

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ABSTRACT

This study examines mother–child reminiscing conversations with respect to variation in use and function of mothers' elaborations, the nature of children's memory elaborations, and the connections between the two, in three Western middle-class cultures where autonomy is valued over relatedness. Mothers participated with their 4-year-old children (35 dyads from Berlin, Germany, 42 dyads from Stockholm, Sweden, and 38 from Tallinn, Estonia). Mothers' open-ended questions predicted children's memory elaborations in Estonian dyads, mothers' statements and verbal confirmation did so in German dyads, and verbal confirmations did so in Swedish dyads. Number of children's elaborations was similar in all three groups, but Estonian mothers were less elaborative than Swedish and German mothers. These findings contrast with previous research in which number of child elaborations has been linked to number of mother elaborations. The results suggest that different aspects of elaborative style function differently. The differences are discussed in light of culturally rooted meanings and practices of talking.

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Mother–child past-event talk is generally regarded as an important tool in early memory socialization. As they participate in such conversations children's autobiographical memory emerges, and they learn to structure their memory narratives (Fivush & Nelson, 2006; Keller et al., 2006; Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Thus, mother–child joint reminiscing creates personal and family identities and maintains family relations (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Bruner, 1990; Fiese & Pratt, 2004). In this study, we focus

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on mother–child past-event talk in three cultural contexts with similar socio-demographic characteristics, but different conversational practices, to investigate characteristics of different maternal elaborations and their effects on children's elaborations during mother–child reminiscing.

Fivush and Fromhoff (1988) identified two distinct conversational styles mothers employ while reminiscing, elaborative and repetitive. Mothers using the elaborative style engage in longer conversations, ask more memory questions, and provide more information about a given event. Mothers employing the repetitive style engage in shorter conversations, repeat questions, and ask about aspects of the event without adding much themselves. These reminiscing styles have been referred to as “high-elaborative” and “low-elaborative” (Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1993), reflecting the fact that all parents use elaborations in their conversations with children but do so to different extents. Mothers using the high-elaborative style not only produce many statement and question elaborations, but also offer frequent evaluations, particularly confirmations, of the child's contributions by repeating or affirming them (Haden, Ornstein, Rudek, & Cameron, 2009; Reese et al., 1993). Studies have also shown that mothers' reminiscing style is consistent over time (Reese et al., 1993) and with different children, i.e., siblings (Haden, 1998).

Maternal high-elaborative style facilitates preschool children's memory and narrative skill development (Farrant & Reese, 2000; Haden et al., 2009; Leyva, Reese, Grolnick, & Price, 2008). It may also be related to other positive aspects of children's cognitive and socio-emotional development (Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006), such as understanding of mind (Reese & Cleveland, 2006) and emotion knowledge (Van Bergen, Salmon, Dadds, & Allen, 2009).

The elaborative style has been defined inconsistently in the literature. Some studies of mother–child talk define the elaborative style to include statements and both open-ended and yes–no questions (Reese & Fivush, 1993); others focus on open-ended questions only (Reese & Newcombe, 2007). Van Bergen, Salmon, Dadds, and Allen (2009) exclude yes–no questions from their definition. Fivush et al. (2006) assert the need to distinguish the facilitative effects of these proposed types of maternal elaborations – an assertion supported by recent research. For example, Haden et al. (2009) found that children whose mothers' use open-ended questions more than or as frequently as statements provide richer memory reports than those whose mothers use fewer open-ended questions than statements. Therefore, even elaborative statements and open-ended questions function differently in mother–child reminiscing conversations.

Differences in maternal reminiscing style (Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1996) are even more pronounced across cultures. For example, Western middle-class mothers are more elaborative with their preschoolers than mothers of other backgrounds (Wang, 2007). Chinese mothers are less elaborative than Euro-American mothers, focusing on repeated factual questions and using reminiscing conversations to teach children social conventions and moral rules (Wang, Leichtman, & Davies, 2000). Euro-American mothers are more elaborative and stress co-construction of memories by valuing the child's point of view. As a possible result, their children provide more memory elaborations than children of the comparatively low-elaborative Chinese mothers. Nonetheless, particular practices within a culture are usually considered adaptive and normal (Keller, 2007; Ochs, 1982; Ochs, Solomon, & Sterponi, 2005; Rogoff, 2003).

Cultural differences in mother–child talk are related to different beliefs and values (both explicit and implicit) about the child, child development, and the status of the child in society (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). More specifically, differences in maternal reminiscing style are related to various cultural models of the self (Fivush et al., 2006). For example, Western urban middle-class families value independence and therefore socialize children toward an autonomous self-concept. Eastern and rural agrarian families, in contrast, emphasize a more interdependent sense of self and socialize children accordingly (Keller, 2007; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Thus, cultural differences in the way mothers reminisce with their children may serve different functions in the socialization process, and may be regarded as adaptive strategies supporting development of the respectively valued self-concept (Keller, 2007).

Previous research has mostly involved Euro-American families representing Western, middle class autonomy-oriented concepts of self (Keller, 2007). However, as, Harkness and Super (2006) point out, comparative studies of Western societies are rare and show that particular parental ethnotheories vary even in similar autonomy-oriented cultural contexts – between Dutch and Euro-American middle-

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